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Published in:
European Journal of Social Psychology

Publication date:
2008

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Renkema, L. J., Stapel, D. A., & van Yperen, N. W. (2008). Go with the flow: Confirming to others in the face of existential threat. Manuscript in preparation.

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Go with the flow: Conforming to others in the face of existential threat

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Abstract

In three studies we investigate the impact of mortality salience on conformity and show that people have a greater preference to conform to the opinions of others when mortality is salient. Study 1 shows that mortality salience increases the degree to which judgments of abstract drawings are influenced by the majority's opinion. Study 2 shows that mortality salience causes people to change their opinions towards societal issues, so that these fit the attitudes they think others have. Study 3 replicates the findings of the first study and additionally shows that people do not conform to the attitude of outgroup members. Our findings extend previous Terror Management Theory research and suggest that conforming to the group is a means to buffer the fear that may otherwise arise in existentially threatening situations. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Like most primates, humans generally live in groups. From an evolutionary perspective, groups increase the survival rate of human beings by protecting their members in times of threat and uncertainty. Not only do groups provide a form of physical protection, they also provide psychological protection as a source for self-esteem and psychological assurance. Even in present times, in which western cultures are often characterized by individualism, people continue to benefit from group life in numerous ways. In the remainder of this paper we examine the psychological benefits that groups offer. We propose that people do not only want to belong to a group in uncertain and threatening times, but that they are also more likely to adopt mainstream attitudes under these circumstances. We will argue and demonstrate that conforming to others may have a terror managing function, and that it may buffer the potential fear that may otherwise arise in threatening and uncertain situations.

TERROR MANAGEMENT

In everyday life, people are often reminded of the fact that death is inescapable. These reminders can be rather salient, for instance a news report on a successful terrorist attack, but they can also be more subtle, such as passing by a funeral home. A prominent and successful model that is often used to explain and predict how people react in the face of existential threats is Terror Management Theory (TMT, Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). According to TMT, the recurrent reminders of one's mortality set off *defensive mechanisms* that are used to buffer the potential anxiety. The impact of these defensive mechanisms manifests itself in the cognitions and behavior of people (for a recent overview see Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004). TMT has shown repeatedly that mortality salience may influence a broad spectrum of behavioral and cognitive responses. Many of these responses demonstrate that one's social environment and in particular one's group has a vital role in managing existential threat. In general, people want to affirm and defend their

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cultural worldview and the groups that are part and parcel of this view. For example, previous research has shown that following mortality salience (a) people overestimate consensus for their beliefs (Pyszczynski et al., 1996; Simon et al., 1997), (b) react more negatively to people who think different and react more positively to people who share the same beliefs (Greenberg et al., 1990; Florian & Mikulincer, 1997), and (c) strengthen their beliefs on topics that validate their cultural worldview (McGregor, Zanna, & Holmes, 2001). However, groups do not only serve a worldview validating function. Increased ingroup bias under mortality salience has also been observed in minimal groups (Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, & Simon, 1996), and Wisman and Koole (2003) have shown that people prefer being in a group over sitting alone when mortality is salient, even if this group opposes their beliefs. These studies suggest that, apart from offering worldview validation, affiliating with group alone may also serve as a buffer against existential threat. Both worldview validation and affiliation are the two key factors that explain why people conform to the beliefs of others in times of threat and uncertainty, which we will discuss in the next section.

TERROR MANAGEMENT AND CONFORMITY

The general hypothesis put forward in this paper is that, when they are reminded of their own death, people are more likely to base their own views on the opinions of others. At first sight, this may sound somewhat counterintuitive since TMT argues that people will stick to their beliefs (defend their own perspective on life), and go to extremes to defend these when mortality is salient. However, we propose that conformity, that is, adjusting one's beliefs to fit the view of others may also buffer anxiety by helping the individual to construct a coherent worldview, and being a valuable member of one's culture.

People may have several reasons to conform to the beliefs and opinions of others; the two most widely documented motives thought to underlie conformity effects are: (a) the need for accurate information (Castelli, Vanzetto, Sherman, & Arcuri, 2001; Quinn & Schlenker, 2002), and (b) the need for social approval (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) and affiliation (Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2002; Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003; Wisman & Koole, 2003). These goals are likely to be activated when mortality is salient, because one of the most powerful situations in which people are likely to be in need of both accurate information and social approval may be situations of threat and uncertainty. Thus, given TMT, it is not unlikely to assume that mortality threat leads to conformity. This reasoning is strengthened by the fact that the need for accurate information and social approval, two of the main goals underlying conformity, are closely related to the two core components of TMT: (a) maintaining a stable cultural worldview and (b) self-esteem maintenance. For example, conforming to others provides people with meaningful information that they can use to interpret, and make sense of novel situations. This is in line with recent TMT research that suggests that this *search for meaning* is facilitated by mortality salience (Landau, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Martens, 2006; Landau et al., 2004; Renkema, Stapel, Maringer, & Van Yperen, in press). Conforming to the beliefs of others may therefore act as a defensive mechanism because it aids in interpreting and structuring the social environment. Additionally, it is well known that conformity may aid in enhancing a feeling of self-worth (see e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). This is again beneficial for people who face mortality threats. Ample research shows that, under mortality threat, people actively seek out ways to *enhance their self-esteem* (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). Thus, conforming to others could also be used as a self-enhancement strategy, especially in the face of existential threat.

In sum, when afraid and uncertain, people may conform to the group, and *go with the flow*, because others can provide accurate information and because others may be a source for self-esteem. It thus seems reasonable to hypothesize that in times of terror and threat, people do good to conform to others, although this might seem to conflict with a strict interpretation of the worldview defense hypothesis which suggests that mortality salience will increase the need to stick to one's own beliefs and opinions. From a TMT perspective, people have two main reasons to conform to the opinions of others. First, the opinions of others may serve as a guideline to give meaning to, and interpret, novel and ambiguous events and situations. Conformity may therefore aid in forming a stable and coherent cultural worldview. Second, conforming to others may increase the likelihood that one will be liked by them. Identifying with others' opinions may thus have a positive effect on self-esteem. We thus expect that a person will be prone to adopt mainstream attitudes in the face of existential threat.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

In the present studies we examined whether people are more likely to conform to the opinions of others when mortality is salient. We tested this hypothesis in a series of three experiments where we varied the source and the content of the opinions we expected people to conform to. In Study 1 we asked participants to rate 30 abstract drawings. Some details of the drawing were listed, as well as a fictitious “population likeability rating” that was either high or low. We hypothesized that the participants would conform to the population ratings when mortality was salient, compared to the control condition. In Study 2, our goal was to show that people would also conform to the public opinion on “real life” topics. Participants were asked how they thought about topics related to immigration and asylum seeking, and how they thought the general public would think about these topics. This study shows that when mortality is salient, people conform to what they assume the general public will think. In Study 3, we replicated the first study and replaced the “general population rating” with ratings by Dutch, German, or Japanese people. We hypothesized that—given that mortality is salient—our (Dutch) participants would conform to the ratings of the Dutch, not to those of the Japanese, and possibly contrast away from the opinions of the Germans, because this group is typically seen as an outgroup and evaluated relatively negative by the Dutch (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998).

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we asked the participants to rate 30 abstract drawings. Below the drawing there was some general information about the drawing along with a fictitious “population likeability rating.” This likeability rating was either high or low. We hypothesized that the participants would be more likely to conform to the average population ratings when mortality was salient, compared to a control condition.

Method

Participants and Design

The participants were 138 psychology students, who took part for course credit. They were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions (Salience: mortality vs. television).

Procedure and Material

Upon entering the laboratory, participants were asked to fill out a booklet containing two ostensibly unrelated studies. Mortality salience was manipulated in the first study where the participants had to answer an open-ended question concerning death (adopted from previous TMT research, e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990). In the mortality salience condition the participants were asked, “please briefly describe the emotions and thoughts that the thought of your own death arouses in you.” Participants in the control condition responded to a parallel question regarding “watching television.”

The second task was presented as a questionnaire that was ostensibly designed to assess to what extent people from all around the world like several art genres.¹ The participants were told that there were multiple versions of the questionnaire and that they received a version with 30 abstract techno-impressionist drawings. The task of the participants was to indicate on an 11-point scale, ranging from 1 (*do not like it at all*) to 11 (*like it very much*) how much they liked each drawing. Below every drawing there was a list of population likeability percentages, three columns that listed what percentage of the population liked, disliked, or had a neutral opinion about the drawings. Ten drawings clearly had a higher percentage of positive ratings, ten a higher percentage of neutral ratings and the other ten had more negative ratings. The average distribution was 60%/20%/20%, so roughly 60% either liked, disliked, or had a neutral opinion about a drawing.

¹The introduction of the second task took most participants about 3 minutes to read; this should be a sufficient delay between the mortality salience manipulation and our dependent measure.

The positive and negative ratings were counterbalanced across the drawings in order to rule out likeability effects of the drawings themselves, resulting in two versions of the questionnaire. This means that the drawing that was liked by the majority of the general public (60%) in version 1 was disliked by most people in the counterbalanced version. The result is that we ended up with one picture that was either liked or disliked by the majority of the population.

Dependent Measures

The participants' ratings of the drawings that had a positive likeability rating were aggregated to compute a positive rating scale which included all drawings that were considered beautiful by the majority of the public. We repeated this procedure for the drawings that were ostensibly disliked by the majority of the public (Cronbach's alpha .67 and .70, respectively).

Results and Discussion

We conducted an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with the average rating of the drawings as the dependent variable, salience (mortality vs. TV) as the independent variable, and population likeability rating (like vs. dislike) as a repeated measure. The results showed that there was a significant main effect of the repeated measure $F(1, 136) = 52.36, p < .001, \eta^2 = .28$. However, this main effect was qualified by the interaction between population likeability and salience $F(1, 136) = 64.88, p < .001, \eta^2 = .32$.

Tests for simple main effects showed that there was an effect of mortality salience on the positive $F(1, 136) = 44.27, p < .001, \eta^2 = .25$, as well as a marginal effect on the negative rating scale $F(1, 136) = 3.35, p < .07, \eta^2 = .03$. When mortality was salient, participants were more likely to conform to the mainstream likeability ratings of the positive rated drawings, compared to the control condition where television was salient ($M = 6.60, SD = 1.21$ vs. $M = 5.24, SD = 1.20$). The same conformity effect occurred for the drawings with a negative population likeability rating, although this difference was less pronounced ($M = 4.96, SD = 1.12$ vs. $M = 5.33, SD = 1.26$, see Figure 1).

STUDY 2

In the first study we used rather abstract stimuli. The average student participating in this study was not likely to not have a well-formed opinion about drawings they had never seen before. Consequently, their opinions towards these drawings

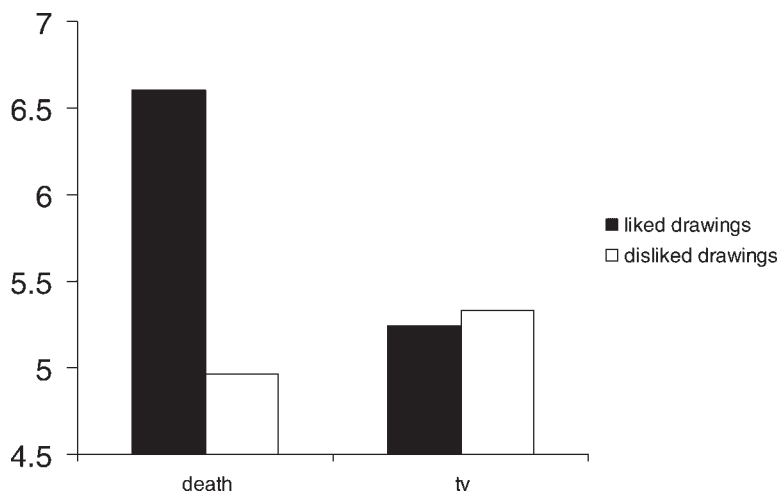


Figure 1. Mean ratings of the drawings as a function of mortality salience and group ratings: Study 1

could perhaps be swayed relatively easily by the general public. We conducted the second study to see if people also conform to mainstream opinions on topics that they are familiar with, and possibly already formed an opinion on.

In Study 2, participants were asked what their attitude was towards several societal issues. We expected that under mortality salience, people would be more likely to conform to what they think that the general public would think, even on topics where they are already familiar with.

Method

Participants and Design

The participants were 100 psychology students, who took part for course credit. They were randomly assigned to experimental conditions of a 2 (Salience: mortality, television) \times 2 (List: group, self/group) within-participants design.

Procedure and Material

Upon entering the laboratory, participants were asked to fill out a booklet containing two ostensibly unrelated studies. Mortality salience was manipulated, utilizing the same manipulation as in Study 1. The salience induction was followed by an unrelated 20-item questionnaire that was used for secondary purposes. The filler task was included in order to create a delay between the mortality salience induction and our dependent measure. This delay was functional because previous research (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994) has shown that the effects of mortality salience emerge more clearly over time.

The second task was presented as a survey that assessed the opinions of students on several societal issues. The participants had to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with seven statements regarding the Dutch immigration policy. The seven statements included both positive and negative views towards the current immigration policy (e.g., “The Dutch immigration policy has failed”). Half of the participants first had to indicate what their personal opinion was, and after that, how they thought the average Dutch person would respond to these statements. The other half of the participants did not report their personal opinion, and only rated how they thought the average Dutch person would answer these questions; this allowed us to make sure that the personal opinions did not affect the rating of the average Dutch person in the other condition. For each statement the participants could indicate on a 9-point scale, ranging from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 9 (*very strongly agree*) to what extent they (or the average Dutch person) agreed with these statements.

Dependent Measures In order to check whether the opinions of our participants differed from how they thought the average Dutch person would react to these statements, we first tried to compute a single scale that represented the general attitude towards immigration questions. However, the participants’ ratings on the statements could not be aggregated into a single scale (Cronbach’s alpha .30). For the participants that filled out both the self and the average Dutch rating, we therefore computed difference scores between participants’ self-report and the opinions participants thought the average Dutch person would give. A difference score for each of the seven statements was computed, and aggregated into a general difference score. The lower the difference score, the closer the opinions of the participants were to the “perceived population beliefs,” which indicates conformity.

Results and Discussion

An ANOVA with the average difference score as the dependent variable and salience (mortality vs. TV) as the independent variables showed that there was an effect of mortality salience on the difference between the reported self-ratings, and opinions that our participants thought the average Dutch persons would have $F(1, 49) = 28.90, p < .001, \eta^2 = .37$. When mortality was salient, the difference between the opinions of the participants, and the opinions the participants thought the

average Dutch person would have, was smaller compared to the control condition ($M = 0.01$, $SD = 0.46$ vs. $M = 1.01$, $SD = 0.80$).

Additionally, we computed a 2 (salience: mortality, television) \times 2 (list: group, self/group) ANOVA for each of the seven statements to check whether the self-reported opinions affected the opinions participants ascribed to the average Dutch person. As expected, we did not find any significant main- or interaction effects for one or more of these statements (all $ps > .1$). This means that the opinions the average Dutch would have according to the participants were not affected by mortality salience, self ratings, or a combination of both.

STUDY 3

The first two studies show that people are more likely to conform to the general public when mortality is salient. The next step is to explore if this effect holds for all groups, or if people are especially likely to conform to groups they identify with. From the extant TMT literature, we know that people hold more positive beliefs towards the ingroup under mortality threat (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002). We would therefore expect that people are more prone to conform to groups they identify with. In order to test this hypothesis, we replicated the first study, and replaced the “general population rating” with ratings by Dutch, German, or Japanese people, the ingroup and a negative and neutral evaluated outgroup respectively. We hypothesized that when their mortality is salient, our participants would conform stronger to the beliefs of the Dutch, compared to those of Japanese or Germans.

Method

Participants and Design

The participants were 90 students. They were randomly assigned to experimental conditions of a 3 (Salience: mortality vs. television vs. dental pain) \times 2 (Rating drawings: high-low vs. low-high) between-participants design.

Procedure and Material

Upon entering the laboratory, participants were asked to fill out a booklet containing two ostensibly unrelated studies. Mortality salience was manipulated in the first study. Similar to study 1 and 2, the participants had to answer an open-ended question concerning death. In the control conditions participants had to answer a parallel question concerning “watching television” and “dental pain”. The dental pain condition was used as an extra control condition in other TMT research (e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002) to control for the alternative explanation that the effects of mortality salience could be due to general fear induction.

The second task was presented as a global questionnaire that was interested in how people form different parts of the world rated several art genres.² The questionnaire was based on the same drawings that were used in Study 1. The participants were told that they received a version with abstract techno-impressionist drawings. The task of the participants was to indicate on an 11-point scale, ranging from 1 (*do not like it at all*) to 11 (*like it very much*) how much they liked these drawings. For every drawing there was a list of last year’s likeability ratings of Dutch, German, and Japanese people. An average rating was given for each of the three populations. Four drawings were presented in total. One painting was clearly the favorite of the Dutch (compared to the Germans and the Japanese who gave a neutral rating), another was especially liked by Germans, and a third painting got the highest rating from Japanese people. The last drawing was liked or disliked by all three groups. The positive and negative ratings were counterbalanced in order to rule out effects of the drawings themselves, resulting in two versions of the questionnaire. This means that the drawing that was rated most positive by Germans was rated most negative in the counterbalanced version of the test. The result is that we ended up with

²Similar to Study 1, the introduction of the second part was sufficient to create a delay between the mortality salience manipulation and our dependent measure.

one picture that was either liked or disliked by one of the three groups ($M_s = 8.5$ and 2.5), and seen as neutral by the others ($M = 5.5$), and one drawing that was liked or disliked by all three groups.

Results and Discussion

All results reported here were analyzed by a 2 (salience: mortality vs. TV vs. dental pain) \times 2 (likeability: like vs. dislike) ANOVA with the rating of the drawing as the dependent variable.

Dutch Ratings

An ANOVA showed that there were no main effects of likeability and mortality salience ($F < 1$ and $F(2, 90) = 2.52$, $p = .12$, $\eta^2 = .03$, respectively). As expected, we did find an interaction effect of mortality salience and likeability on the rating of the drawings $F(2, 84) = 3.21$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Tests for simple main effects yielded the following differences. As hypothesized, when mortality was salient, people liked the drawings better if the Dutch liked it, compared to when the Dutch disliked it $F(1, 84) = 9.21$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .10$ (see Table 1). There was no difference in the average rating of the liked and disliked drawings in the control conditions ($F_s < 1$). As expected, when mortality was salient, participants were more likely to conform to the ratings of ingroup. Furthermore, we found that, similar to Study 1, the differences between mortality salience and the control conditions are mainly driven by ratings on the drawings that are liked by the Dutch $F(2, 84) = 3.64$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .08$, and not so much by ratings on the disliked drawings ($F < 1$).

Japanese Ratings

An ANOVA showed that there were no main effects of likeability and mortality salience ($F_s < 1$). In addition, we did not find an interaction effect of mortality salience and likeability on the rating of the drawings ($F < 1$). Thus, unlike with the Dutch, the participants did not conform to the Japanese ratings. This means that the participants were not influenced by the ratings of the Japanese (see Table 1).

German Ratings

An ANOVA showed that there were no main effects of likeability and mortality salience ($F_s < 1$ and $F(2, 90) = 2.15$, $p = .15$, $\eta^2 = .03$, respectively). We did find an interaction effect of mortality salience and likeability on the rating of the drawings $F(2, 84) = 3.70$, $p < .03$, $\eta^2 = .08$. Tests for simple main effects yielded the following differences. As

Table 1. Rating of each drawing as a function mortality salience, group ratings and type of group: Study 3

	Terror salience					
	Death		TV		Dental pain	
	Group rating					
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
All groups (drawing 1)	5.3 (0.5)	3.6 (0.4)	4.1 (0.4)	4.5 (0.4)	4.2 (0.5)	4.5 (0.5)
Dutch (drawing 2)	7.2 (0.5)	5.2 (0.5)	5.6 (0.4)	5.6 (0.4)	5.7 (0.5)	5.8 (0.5)
Japanese (drawing 3)	4.7 (0.5)	4.8 (0.5)	4.7 (0.5)	4.6 (0.5)	4.8 (0.5)	4.7 (0.5)
German (drawing 4)	4.7 (0.5)	6.6 (0.4)	5.6 (0.4)	5.4 (0.4)	5.7 (0.5)	5.5 (0.5)

Note: Figures indicate the average rating of the drawings on an 11-point scale, ranging from 1 (*do not like it at all*) to 11 (*like it very much*). Standard deviations are reported between brackets.

hypothesized, when mortality was salient, people rated the drawings more negatively when the Germans liked it, compared to when the Germans disliked it $F(1, 84) = 9.69, p < .01, \eta^2 = .10$ (see Table 1). There was no difference in the average rating of the liked and disliked drawings in the control conditions ($F_s < 1$). Additionally, again we find that the effects are mainly driven by ratings on the drawings that are disliked by the Germans $F(2, 84) = 2.42, p < .1, \eta^2 = .06$, and not so much by the rating on drawings Germans like ($p > .25$). Thus, when mortality was salient, participants were more likely to contrast away from the ratings of the Germans. This result seems to indicate that people contrast away from ratings given by a negatively evaluated group.

Combined Ratings

Lastly, we analyzed the response to the drawing that was either liked or disliked by all three groups. This rating should have similar results as the population likeability rating we used in Study 1. An ANOVA showed that there were no main effects of likeability and mortality salience ($F_s < 1$). As expected, we did find an interaction effect of mortality salience and likeability on the rating of the drawings $F(2, 90) = 3.28, p < .05, \eta^2 = .07$. Tests for simple main effects yielded the following differences. As hypothesized, when mortality was salient, people liked the drawings better if others liked it, compared to when others disliked it $F(1, 84) = 6.50, p = .01, \eta^2 = .07$ (see Table 1). There was no difference in the average rating of the liked and disliked drawings in the control conditions ($F_s < 1$). Thus, when mortality was salient, participants were more likely to conform to the dominant likeability, compared to the TV and dental pain control conditions. Additionally, we found no differences between the liked and the disliked ratings between the conditions ($p_s > .1$).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Taken together, these studies make an important contribution to the existing literature on the effects of mortality salience on the beliefs and opinions of people. They show that when mortality is salient, one is likely to conform to mainstream beliefs and opinions. The reason for this might be that the opinion of general public may provide one with (a) accurate information and (b) social approval. These two motives are thought to underlie conformity processes in general and are in line with fit Terror Management Theory. In Study 1, we showed that, when mortality is salient, people either like or dislike an abstract drawing more, based on the "population likeability rating." In the second experiment we found that this effect is not limited to vague and abstract topics where one has no prior knowledge on, but that it also holds for opinions about clear societal issues. Furthermore, Study 2 shows that people conform to the public opinion, even when it is not explicitly given (as was the case in Study 1). That is, when mortality was salient, people conformed to what they *thought* the public opinion would be. In Study 3, we used a paradigm similar to the first study, and showed that people are especially likely to conform to the preferences of the ingroup, but not to those of an outgroup. Even more so, we found that people contrast away from the rating of a disliked outgroup.

The most important finding is that people do not necessarily stick to their personal beliefs when they are confronted with their own mortality. Instead, people turn to mainstream beliefs, and *go with the flow*. Conforming to mainstream beliefs may aid in making accurate judgments, and gaining social approval, two important factors in coping with existential fear. Consequently, the current research extends previous TMT research and may shed a new light on existing findings. For example, Pyszczynski and colleagues have shown that people tend to overestimate the consensus for their existing beliefs when confronted with their own mortality (Pyszczynski et al., 1996). The findings in the studies presented here suggest that this may very well be explained by the fact that people conform to the general public when mortality is salient. Thus, it might be that people do not overestimate the consensus with their beliefs, but that they simply conform to mainstream beliefs when mortality is salient.

Although we believe that the presented results are relatively clear, there are several points that may need further attention in future research. Firstly, it seems that people conform more to positive ratings of the drawings given by the general public than to negative ratings. One of the reasons for this effect could be that people are more hesitant to appear judgmental following mortality salience. A second point of interest is whether people conform to all groups, and if not, what are the characteristics that determine whether one will conform or not. In our first study we showed that the group

whose opinions people tend to follow when mortality is salient can be quite vague. We used the term “population likeability rating” and did not specifically refer to a group, city, or even a country. In Study 3, however, we showed that people do not conform to a group that is clearly an (neutral) outgroup, and that people contrast away from a negatively evaluated group. However, because the ratings of these groups were presented together, this intergroup context might have affected our results. For example, in Study 3 the Japanese ratings might have influenced the ratings of our participants if they were presented without the Dutch and German ratings for example.

Future research should also look into specific contexts and groups that may facilitate or hamper conformity processes. Simon and colleagues (1997) for example, have shown that when people are told that they were conformists, they preferred to appear distinct from others. On the other hand, if they were portrayed as being different than others, they were more likely to overestimate consensus. These results are in line with optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), and it is likely that these optimal distinctiveness effects are not limited to perceived consensus, but also apply to conformist behavior. Lastly, future research should examine how people react when it concerns attitudes or opinions that are more important to, or strongly held by the participants, and how this interacts with other group variables. For example, a strong belief might be hard to change, even though it is only supported by a minority.

Overall the results presented in this paper indicate that people’s cultural worldview is adaptive. People may change their worldview and opinions, depending on the group that is salient in a particular context (see also Turner, 1987).

In sum, the present findings provide clear and strong evidence for our hypothesis that, under mortality salience, people conform to the opinions of the general public. The reasoning behind this hypothesis is two fold. First, others may provide accurate information, and help to interpret, and make sense of the social environment. Secondly, conforming to mainstream attitudes is a strategy to gain social approval and thereby maintain or boost self-esteem. Thus, in times of terror and threat people do not only want to be *in* a group because it provides physical protection, they also want to be *like* the group because this may help them to understand what is going on, and it makes them feel they are doing the right thing.

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